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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the authors' experiences with organizing and running groups for clients in career transition, whether that be a completely new career or a job search. One key to successful groups is organization, especially finding the right mix of members. They can have similar or different goals, but must be well matched for ego-strength. The group leader's style must also be considered in setting up a group. Some leaders do better with unstructured groups, others with more fixed agendas. Finally the issue of group termination is discussed. Especially for open-ended groups, this must be carefully orchestrated to allow the group members to disengage and carry on with the skills they have learned. (Author)

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Harnessing the Power of Career Transition Groups

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Chapter Two

Harnessing the Power of Career Transition Groups

Marianne Adoradio and Anne Oja

Summary

This paper discusses the authors' experience with organizing and running groups for clients in career transition, whether that be a completely new career or a job search. One key to successful groups is organization, especially finding the right mix of members. They can have similar or different goals, but must be well matched for ego-strength. The group leader's style must also be considered in setting up a group. Some leaders do better with unstructured groups, others with more fixed agendas. Setting appropriate expectations for the group members is another key. Finally the issue of group termination is discussed. Especially for open-ended groups, this must be carefully orchestrated to allow the group members to disengage and carry on with the skills they have learned.

Introduction

Support groups gained huge popularity in the early 1970s with the establishment of Est, Lifespring and other encounter groups. Although these have largely faded away (Lifespring still exists), groups have not. A 1991 Gallup survey of small group membership showed that 40% of adults were involved in some kind of group activity, from church groups to book clubs to AA (Yalom, 1995). What fraction of those covered career issues is not known, but clearly a large number of people believe in the power of groups.

As an example of career groups, we can look at Kate Wendleton's work (1992) around her Five O'Clock Club begun in the late 1970s. These were based on groups of the same name established in Philadelphia in 1891 when business leaders shared their work and life experiences "in a setting of sobriety and good humor." Even more recently, Success Teams have become a popular and effective method of setting goals and achieving success, through the work of Barbara Sher.

As groups have been popular for many years, why should we, as private practitioners, think about them now? In the current economy, they have several advantages, both for the Career Counselor and for the participants. First, for the organizer, they are a way of sustaining revenue at a time when many clients can no longer afford to pay full rates. They are also

a way of building a business by introducing a larger number of people to our services.

For our clients, career transition groups have many advantages. They can be both efficient and timely:

- Access services at a lower cost
- Provide a sense of connectedness at a time of unemployment
- Perform reality testing by their peers, not just career counselors
- Contribute to vicarious learning by hearing about others talk about their interviews, etc.
- Encourage altruism, a way of helping others and staying positive oneself

Organizing Groups

The most difficult aspect of any group is often getting it organized. There are many decisions to make and mistakes to avoid. Some of the easier decisions involve logistics:

- When and where? Pick a time and place that allows maximum attendance for your audience.
- Open or closed membership and length? An 8-week group should probably not allow new members after the first session; an open-ended group will have membership changes and will have the time to assimilate the new members.
- Pricing? This should be appropriate for the membership. For example, a group for the long-term unemployed will not be able to afford the same prices as a group for executives.

The more difficult decisions involve membership. There are several dimensions that come into play. The first is a commonality of goals. Do you mix career changers with job seekers? Do you mix industries or job types? Our experience has been that you can do either. More homogenous groups are often more appropriate for very short-term groups because there is a learning curve for the participants. But, perhaps the most important factor is getting new ideas from people of differing experiences and backgrounds. In overly homogenous groups, members might actually be competing with each other for the same jobs—not a comfortable situation.

Another factor is gender. We have run both mixed groups and those restricted to women in transition. Both have been successful, but they are different. In our experience (and we've found no empirical studies on this), the women's group bonded more quickly and provided more generalized support. But to do that, they often veered off topic, and spent time on non-career issues such as mother-daughter relationships. The

mixed groups were easier to keep focused, perhaps because there was not a similar comfort level with bringing up personal issues. The group leader needs to be comfortable with whatever membership is chosen.

Probably the most important factor is the most difficult to assess, and that is ego-strength. Can you put someone who has been out of work for a year in the same group with the currently employed or very recently down-sized? Of course it depends on the individual, but we would urge caution. Someone with very low self-esteem can be damaged, not helped, by a roomful of confident job seekers. This implies all potential group members must be carefully screened. As Shapiro (1998) points out, "Some screening errors can be so serious as to almost guarantee failure." Although he is speaking of therapy groups, the same can be said for career transition groups.

Leadership Roles and Styles

Is leading a group right for you? It can be if you know yourself well, and design a group that fits your style. Groups can be either structured or unstructured. In the former, members check-in with each other and get help on whatever issues they might have that day. This works well for leaders who are comfortable in a Rogerian client-centered approach. Equally successful groups can have fixed agendas and structured meetings. All groups typically start with a check-in, but these can be time-delimited, and the bulk of the session devoted to a predetermined topic. Some facilitative leaders may set a full topic schedule relevant to job search and career change at the first group meeting. However, it is very important that the leader re-validate the topic at each meeting and adjust to the most important issues for that particular week. In all cases, expectations must be set appropriately so members know what kind of group they are joining.

Whatever the leader's style and the group's structure, the leader has these major roles:

- Information resource for the group
- Catalyst for new ideas
- Facilitator and time keeper, to keep things moving and to ensure each member has an opportunity to participate
- Model listener and communicator, showing expected behavior by example
- Maintainer of appropriate boundaries, responsible for intervention if necessary
- Reinforcer and environment manipulator, providing appropriate support when needed and controlling emotional levels appropriately

Group Goals

While the group leader has implicitly set some overall goals by defining the membership (is it a career change or job search group?), the participants must set their own individual goals. What do they hope to accomplish during the group? Why have they joined? In the first meeting, members usually state their goals and any roadblocks they have identified. These can be helpful to the group leader in terms of identifying specific topics to cover before the end of the group.

For most career-oriented groups, each individual also sets very specific objectives from one week to another that will help them reach the goal. This is the technique used so successfully by Barbara Sher in her Success Teams and is a key part of our groups as well. Because these are not generalized support groups, it is important that members feel progress is made on a weekly basis. Even if the long-term goal is not met by the termination of the group, individuals will have gotten closer and gained techniques to use on their own.

Interventions

Interventions can be as simple as "side-barring" an issue not appropriate in group, approaching ground rules not being respected, or confronting a member who has been judgmental towards another group member. This is a chance for the leader to model group behavior and communicate skills for all of the members. There may be a time when a more serious intervention is required, such as discovering that a member has a more serious issue than the group can support. This will require assessment and intervention with that individual away from group time. If the member leaves the group, it will be important to discuss the change at the next meeting, while keeping confidential issues in mind.

Ending a Group

For all groups it is important to announce termination well ahead of time. Even in a fixed-length group, a reminder that "we have only 3 sessions left" gives group members a chance to raise any issues they might want to discuss. For an open-ended group, this is even more critical as there was no set agreement ahead of time. In a long-term group that has built a high degree of cohesiveness, members may resist termination, even if they are no longer benefiting in any practical ways. It is up to the leader to raise the subject and prepare the group. It might take several tries before the members reach consensus.

Make the last meeting memorable. We try to leave each participant with

some tangible reminder. This can be a resource list or a quote, or any other appropriate item that encourages them to keep on track. It is also powerful to have each group member share the most important thing gained from his/her group experience. A group is only as successful as members' behavior once the group has ended. The overriding goal is always to teach job-search skills that will be useful for the rest of their working lives.

Conclusions

In the authors' experience, participating in and leading groups can be a rewarding activity for everyone. A good place to start is with a job search group of limited duration. Clients come with common goals, and expectations are easier to set. Open ended groups for career changers come much closer to therapy groups, as clients often bring personal issues that relate to their desire for a change. The leader needs to be more flexible and alert to non-career issues. Again preparation and screening of potential group members is key. Whatever the format, the authors have found groups to be a valuable addition to their career services and urge other practitioners to consider them also.

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